

AUSTERITY, AUTONOMY AND THE POLITICS  
OF RESISTANCE<sup>(1)</sup>

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Introduction

Conflicts between central and local governments, in particular between Westminster and the councils of the large urban areas, have been a marked feature of the past decade in Britain. The tensions evident enough during the years of Edward Heath, Harold Wilson and James Callaghan have become sharper and more divisive since Margaret Thatcher and the 'new right' came to power. Over the past three years these central/local confrontations have led the national government to take extraordinary measures to control those recalcitrant local authorities which resisted specific programmes or the demands for general economic stringencies.

Some of the most publicised and acrimonious disputes occurred in Scotland. Dundee and Stirling District councils mounted campaigns of resistance to the Tenants Rights (Scotland) Act of 1980, the Act which gave expression to one aspect of the government's determination to 'privatise' public resources by requiring local authorities to organise the sale of council houses. Lothian Region, over many months, attempted to defy the Secretary of State for Scotland's demands for substantial reductions in local government spending and the ruling Labour Group seriously considered resigning en bloc in order to avoid implementing what it saw as harmful and unnecessary policies handed down from London. The level of opposition to the austerities required by the Thatcher government has prompted legislation which effectively redefines the rights and responsibilities of local authorities. In England and Wales the Minister for the Environment, Michael Heseltine, has taken new powers to force local administrations to follow

his directives and in Scotland we have had the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions)(Scotland) Act of 1981 to bolster the already substantial powers vested in George Younger as Secretary of State. In both cases - but most evidently in Scotland - the effect has been greatly to reduce the autonomy of local government and substantially to increase the coercive powers of the central state. It is ironic that the party which campaigned for a 'rolling back of the state' and which historically has made much of the virtues of local autonomy should so strengthen the powers of Whitehall and Westminster.

Local politics, then, and especially urban politics, have been changing in the last few years. The relations between central and local levels of government have become more bitter and contestatory, the ideological differences between 'left' and 'right' have widened, or at least become more evident, as local politics has become more and more incorporated in battles between the major national parties. And increasingly the anger and resistance on both the left and the right has broken out of the formal party structure and spilled on to the streets in marches and demonstrations.

So how should we make sense of this? Recent writings in public administration and political science on central-local relations tend to fall into two categories: - those that rest on the analysis of economic relations between levels of government, and those which look mainly at what we might call institutional politics - the study of political parties, and of political relations between centre and locality.

Precisely because the recent arguments between the Secretary of State and the leaders of some local authorities in Scotland have been cast in money terms, there has been a good deal of academic work focussed on the financial aspects<sup>(2)</sup>. And this work reveals some of the real and very disquieting effects of the actions of the new right. Thus, in Scotland we can see that the changing distribution of rate support grant, which has benefitted the high tax base, low spending authorities at the expense of the low tax base, high spending authorities, is weakening the traditional attempts at redistribution. It is unashamedly regressive, productive of greater inequalities between regions. And it is also plain that

central government places low priority on specific services when it projects falls of 9.5% and 39% for education and housing between 1979/80 and 1983/84<sup>(3)</sup>. These investigations of the financial problems of the local authorities lead invariably to the conclusion that we cannot analyse the plight of local government simply in terms of 'financial strain' or 'fiscal crisis', that behind the economic arguments lie profound differences in political objectives and complex political struggles.

Since the mid-seventies the relations between central and local governments have been changing. In Scotland, for instance, the once rather cosy relationship between the Scottish Office and local administrations has become markedly more acrimonious as central government has sought to impose stricter and more direct control over local affairs. There has been a real loss of local autonomy and that is resented. Moreover, as several writers point out<sup>(4)</sup>, local politics have been articulated more and more through national parties. Simply put they have been 'nationalised'. Local issues are not only given expression through national parties, but the nature of local political discourse becomes more and more intimately connected with, and responsive to, national concerns. The effect is to link parochial aspirations or discontents to wider, more general themes and thereby frequently to sharpen and strengthen opposition to central government.

The two strands of writing, then, the one dealing basically with the economic position of local authorities, the other treating the political relationships, illuminate some aspects of the present struggles but they still leave us with many unanswered questions. In particular, they offer little to explain why it was that the most vigorous confrontations between central and local government occurred where they did.

It seems to us that if we are to understand this we need an altogether more sociological approach. That is easy to say, but what precisely would it look like? Which factors really help explain why resistance developed where it did? Some preliminary work on resistance in Lothian and Dundee suggests that we need to look at three things.

First, we need to focus on the political orientations, commit-

ments and organisational skill of those in positions of power. That means the councillors and the party activists. But it is important that we go beyond this, that we develop a conception of the local polity which encompasses the multitude of loosely constituted groups and associations whose members play important roles in the mobilising of opinion and the shaping of political action. It also means retaining a sense of the broad changes that are occurring in the modes of representation and the repertoires of collective action - the increasing reliance on single issue groups, the familiarity with methods of lobbying or demonstrating and the appearance of new parties at local as well as national levels.

Secondly, we require a sharp appreciation of politics as process, as a continuous set of struggles, for today's conflicts draw upon and are in some measure shaped by the legacies of earlier battles. In local politics there are 'legacies' of a material kind in the form of particular sorts or levels of public goods and public services won in prior struggles. There are legacies in the form of organisations and institutions through which opinion has been mobilised before; there are legacies of personal and institutional contacts, networks that can be drawn upon when the need arises. Finally, there are legacies of ideals, ideas and symbols that play an important part in the political discourse in any region or city.

Thirdly, it is important to recognise that local politics are imbedded in a wider political framework, that their relationships with central government may be shaped by party political considerations of a national kind. It matters whether a local administration is made of the same party complexion as the Westminster government, or is made up of those from the opposing party; it matters that particular local authorities may have earned themselves a reputation for intransigence or militancy in the past. And it is obviously important to pay attention to the balance of political forces at local levels. Marginal districts or regions may become targets for central government action - their expenditures identified as 'excessive and unreasonable', for example - if there is some prospect that the ensuing political struggle may lead to success for the government party in forthcoming local elections. Local struggles are conditioned in important ways by such considerations.

We can now return to the initial question. Why and how did resistance to the government's measures appear in particular local authorities? We will focus on Dundee and on Lothian;<sup>(5)</sup> the first, a case of the lower tier of administration (a district) opposing the directives to sell off council houses; the second, a higher tier (a region) fighting government efforts to cut its overall budget by £47 million. The two authorities could hardly be more different; Dundee is an industrial city with much urban decay and deprivation; the other is a large area dominated by the bourgeois and relatively prosperous city of Edinburgh. However, in two important respects there was a resemblance - both had Labour councils, and both were marginal.

Labour on Lothian Region could muster, after one councillor defected to the SDP, 25 members out of a council of 48. In Dundee, the Labour administration had a more comfortable majority of 6 over other parties in the 1980 District elections. However, in the twelve previous years, Dundee had a succession of 'hung' administrations, and no party had overall control in that period<sup>(6)</sup>. In both Lothian and Dundee, marginality has heightened the level of political awareness and controversy.

A popular explanation for the resistance of Lothian to Mr Younger's demands, one found in the press and employed by the Conservatives locally, was familiar enough. The confrontation, we were told, was being sought by a dedicated group of marxists and ultra-leftists on the council. They were - quite illegitimately, it was said - challenging the authority of the democratically elected national government. What one saw in Lothian region, it was argued, was a manifestation of those broad changes which had tilted the Labour Party in the country as a whole, decisively to the left. The ruling group on the local council was now being dominated by young, inexperienced, idealistic, even fanatical leftists. Or so we were informed. Much was made of the internal conflicts in the Labour group. The young turks supposedly were out of step with the older, more cautious members of their own party and out of touch with the mass of Labour voters<sup>(7)</sup>.

In these popular explanations there were powerful echoes of a thesis well-known in British political sociology - the decline of

working class politics<sup>(8)</sup>. Was there then some truth in the assertion that the Labour Party was dominated by young middle class activists who were preventing the party from articulating the interests of the working class? Some recent work on the social composition of local Labour parties does indeed suggest that important changes have been taking place<sup>(9)</sup>. Was this also true in Edinburgh? Over the past year some of our students<sup>(10)</sup> have set out to examine this matter, and from their work we can examine the political orientations and social characteristics of the Labour councillors and activists.

First, analysis of the ruling Labour group on the council revealed that a good many were young, professionally qualified or in other middle class jobs. Seven of the twenty Labour councillors surveyed had professional backgrounds, four had clerical or other non-manual jobs, six were manual workers, two were businessmen and one gave her occupation as housewife. At the risk of some oversimplification one could discern a division between an Old Guard of established local politicians and a New Wave of Labour representatives. Of the eight most recently elected (since 1974), seven had received higher education, and of these five had been in social service occupations. There was too a rough correspondence between this division and the distinct geographical areas from which they came. Most of the New Wave represented wards of the city while the Old Guard were recruited chiefly from the landward areas in which mining communities were important.

TABLE 1  
AGE BY AREA REPRESENTED

	Age	
	Under 45	Over 45
Landward wards	1	6
City wards	9	4

TABLE 2  
YEARS ON COUNCIL BY AREA REPRESENTED

	Years on Council	
	Less than ten years	More than ten years
Landward wards	1	6
City wards	7	6

As one commentator<sup>(11)</sup> has written:

The radical councillors who dominated Lothian when it fought the government were elected from Edinburgh seats - though their majority over the Conservatives depended on seats won for Labour in mining areas around the city. These councillors were young, highly educated and sufficiently dedicated to give up paid employment to be councillors full-time. Indeed, at one point, 22 of Labour's 26 councillors were full-timers.

There is little doubt that a number of the newer, professionally qualified, full-time councillors were attracted by the prospects of creating in Lothian an administration which operated on more 'genuinely socialist' lines. Their much clearer, more ideological commitments provided the zeal for the battles with the central authority. From the interviews it is plain too that the more recently elected Labour councillors entered local government, not as had happened so often in the past, as a stepping stone to Parliament, but as a worthwhile political career in itself. They saw the newly created region as a substantial arena within which to attain some of their political objectives<sup>(12)</sup>. Their emergence represented too a partial reform of the local party since to win the nominations they and their supporters ousted a good few of the more pragmatic and, in one or two instances, possibly corrupt, old stagers.

Secondly, it was possible to see that among the younger councillors there was a new conception of their role. In particular they saw it as their task to encourage political activism on the part of local or issue-specific groups and to be responsive to pressure groups in the form of tenants associations, women's rights groups and others. Thus, for them 'politics' involved far more than formal party affairs, which was not to say that their responsibilities to the party were taken lightly. Far from it. They believed that councillors should act

more strictly in accordance with a party line than had the Old Guard, with their propensity for compromise. Theirs, indeed, was a more ideological politics, their view of their role more that of delegates than representatives of all their constituents.

Behind all this lay an important structural change. The re-organisation in 1975 created two tiers of government - Lothian Region and Edinburgh District - each with distinct functions. The Region with a budget of four times that of the District constituted a new, much larger political arena. An authority with much more extensive powers and a larger budget attracted aspiring councillors in part from the seasoned activists of the old local governments but also, and importantly, from many whose engagement with local politics was fairly recent. What the latter, in particular, were working towards was a new style of local political activity. To see these new recruits drawn largely from professional (and specifically social service backgrounds) as representing a 'decline' in working class politics is wrong. What they offered was a broader approach, a quest for political expression and mobilisation through additional grass-roots channels and diverse local associations.

A second study<sup>(13)</sup> focussing on Labour Party activists in two Parliamentary constituencies in Edinburgh confirmed this impression of there being a new wave of political actors<sup>(14)</sup>. Again the evidence of a preponderance of 'middle class' activists was clear but closer examination showed that most had been upwardly mobile and their identification with their working class roots and the perception of their objectives as 'working class' politics was very strong. One could not draw from this research support for Hindess' statement that

there has been a decline in political activity resulting from identification with, and commitment to, the interests of the working class as such<sup>(15)</sup>

Rather what both pieces of work show is that the Labour Party at grass roots level is becoming more and more a party whose activists are young, highly educated and occupationally mobile. What they want is a more robust, more principled form of socialism. From their ranks came some of the local councillors and their deep suspicion of the current Parliamentary leaders (on the Left as well as the

Right) did much to inspire their opposition to the Secretary of State. It gave them stomach for the fight.

During those months when the confrontation with the Secretary of State was at its height the attempts to mobilise popular opposition to the proposed cuts in expenditure produced obvious results<sup>(16)</sup>. Between February and September 1981 there were strikes and rallies, petitions were signed and M.P.s lobbied. Many hundreds of trade unionists, local authority workers, council tenants and others participated in what the Lothian Region Joint Trade Union Committee dubbed 'the battle for Lothian'. On June 30th some 10,000 people marched through the city centre and attended a rally to protest against Mr Younger's proposal to cut £47 million from the regional rate support grant. There clearly was much popular support for the Labour Group on the Council and for the local Labour Party's strategy of resistance - and it was evident that the diverse associations of workers and tenants could be induced to act, albeit briefly, in a solidaristic way. No doubt the collaboration of so many voluntary bodies owed a good deal to the visibility of the opposition, for the Lothian rate-payers group, R.A.G.E., also sought to mobilise opinion in support of the Local Tory councillors and for what it saw as Mr Younger's laudable efforts to produce regional 'economy measures'.

Throughout these months then it was quite clear that much political action, both in defiance of, and in support of, the policies of the new right was articulated through a complex web of local associations. The importance of those informal, that is, extra-party structures was plain to see. The Labour Group could call on the historic ties and natural sympathies of the unions and, through a network of personal and institutional links, summon diverse working class and leftist groups to the fray. Likewise, the Conservatives could employ the old slogans of the Progressive Association to rally ratepayers and activists on the right.

Here we can see the importance of the second factor explaining why resistance developed in Lothian - the historic legacies of local class conflicts. The symbols, slogans and latent groupings were all pressed into service. The significance of past legacies in the local polity was revealed in ever sharper detail in the conflicts that took

place in Dundee<sup>(17)</sup>. Politically and financially, district councils are of less account than the regional authorities but in the re-organised structure they have retained one very important function. The districts still control public housing and, in Scotland where there is such a huge stock of council property, that resource really matters<sup>(18)</sup>. Moreover, it is typically seen as something created by the Labour Party, constituting one, if not the major achievement of local socialist policy. Dundee has a very long-standing housing problem. It was notorious for the poor quality of its housing not only in the nineteenth century but, as recent historical work shows, even in the 1950s it had a formidable problem and was the city with the worst housing conditions in Scotland<sup>(19)</sup>.

In the post-war period council housing was provided on a very large scale in Dundee. Over thirty odd years it came to be a 'precious legacy' of Labour's efforts. The programme of privatisation set in train by the Thatcher government was perceived by many Dundonians as something close to sacrilege. Labour Councillors pointed out that selling off council houses would only exacerbate a still serious housing shortage and since funds for new council house building were now minimal the policy would simply reduce the quality of housing left in public hands. Public housing really had become part of the social wage for the working class in Dundee. It had greater significance in their lives and for the Labour Group it had profound symbolic importance. Around the housing issue then there was a rich potential for political mobilisation, for the emergence of something that might be seen as an urban social movement.

British writers have long been sceptical about the possibility of urban social movements developing in this country in anything like the way they have done in some continental countries<sup>(20)</sup>. In particular there have been doubts about the feasibility of linking disputes about 'consumption' issues (like housing) to the struggles of the workplace. And, given the narrow economism of many British unions, these misgivings have not been groundless. But in Dundee in 1980-81 the defiance of central government directives about housing took on the character of a class-based movement and did so through the substantial involvement of union organisations. If we seek to understand

this unusual occurrence we are brought to a sharp appreciation of the ways local polities are shaped by historical processes.

Dundee is an industrial city, indeed it is Scotland's most industrial city with an even larger proportion of its working population involved in manufacturing than Glasgow has. In 1971 some 43% were so employed; in Glasgow only 32% were. Many of its traditional industries, especially those organised around the jute trade or shipbuilding were in serious decline in the early post-war period and in the sixties new concerns were persuaded to establish themselves in the city to provide work for its pool of unemployed. Firms specialising in mechanical engineering, instrument making and electrical engineering became major employers and as they grew so too did the strength of one particular industrial union - the Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers. It emerged as the dominant union in the dominant industries. With 9,500 members it represents 1 in 8 of all insured workers in the city.

Over the past fifteen years this union (and its predecessor, the AEU) has come to play a most important role in the political life of the city, and throughout the 'No-Sales' campaign in 1980-81 it did more than any other agency to mobilise support and shape oppositional strategies. It did so not by using the formal channels of Labour Party/Trade Union communication (the Trades Council, for instance) and not by simple lobbying of the local politicians. Rather its influence came from two informal groups which had been established principally at its initiative and which it effectively dominated. The first, the Liaison Committee, was set up in the early nineteen seventies to coordinate opposition to the Labour government's proposals for industrial relations reform and subsequently to the Conservatives' Industrial Relations Act. It brought together in an unofficial, but highly influential way, local shop stewards of the A.U.E.W. The second, the full-time officers' group (the FTO) was created in the mid seventies with the purpose of establishing a permanent, though informal, communications network for the Labour movement. It invited all full-time union officials and Labour Party officials to bi-weekly meetings and due to their numerical importance (and the poor attendance of white-collar union representatives) the officers of the AUEW have remained the most important members of this

group. The liaison committee, which brings together about five hundred unionist and Labour Party officials provided, during the 'No-Sales' campaign, a most effective means of mobilising popular opposition to the government's policy, since the delegates to its meetings relayed information about the council housing issue and about the committee's deliberations directly to the workers on the shop floor. In this way it linked work place and community struggles and there was ample evidence of the willingness of AUEW rank and file members to engage in the campaign in defence of public housing. The F.T.O. group with its fortnightly meetings also played a part in the general mobilisation but, more importantly it offered a forum within which strategies and tactics could be discussed. It was extremely important that the programme of resistance be carefully managed. For one thing, it had to allow time for the Labour Party to publicise and politicise the issue. Too vigorous a reaction might prompt the Secretary of State to take special steps to ensure conformity before a broad base of popular opposition could be rallied. The evidence suggests that the F.T.O. group displayed a good deal of sensitivity and skill in this process of orchestrating the popular discontent.

One other group of trades unionists were also to feature in the Dundee campaign. The role of public service workers in contemporary urban politics is an extremely delicate and interesting one<sup>(21)</sup>. They now constitute a large and relatively highly organised group whose livelihoods are directly affected by central government efforts to restrain local expenditure. They have the potential to exert considerable influence on the central-local struggles and the politicisation of these. Some evidence of that was seen in Dundee. The local branch of the National Association of Local Government Officers (NALGO) reacted to the Tenants' Rights (Scotland) Act by announcing that its members would refuse to process any applications for council house sales until additional staff were taken on for that purpose. Although this technically put them in dispute with the council it also provided the Labour Group with an additional reason for resisting the Thatcher government's wishes. Moreover, when the NALGO branch secretary roundly condemned the sales policy he was effectively aligning his members with the Labour Group's stance. And there was one other important contribution made by the public service workers. Those of them who

were employed directly in the administration of local public housing had at their disposal the best sources of information on local housing conditions and housing policies. They had the ammunition with which to launch a reasoned attack on the privatisation policy. This they did. At the public enquiry on 23rd February 1981 the NALGO representative produced the most impressive and best researched arguments against the sales policy, pointing out the serious economic and social effects this would have, demonstrating that local people in a recent survey had been much more concerned about housing conditions than forms of tenure and revealing the essentially political, as opposed to economic or administrative purposes, of the government's plans.

The public service workers had played an important role. Yet they were never fully integrated into the campaign. The industrial unions made no efforts to involve them in their efforts at mobilisation or their deliberations concerning strategy. And for its part, NALGO pursued a self-consciously independent line. As for the Labour councillors, while they undoubtedly welcomed the support which NALGO provided for their stand they were more than a little apprehensive that unless they were careful, their opponents would charge them with deliberate political manipulation of NALGO's trade dispute with the council. Thus, in the attempts to build a popular social movement to defend public housing the public service workers remained on the margins.

The Dundee Council's campaign of opposition lasted for the better part of a year. It began in October 1980 with the council finding a legal loophole which justified them in taking no action to implement the Tenants' Rights Bill, a loophole which was quickly blocked by special amending legislation rushed through Parliament. The refusal of NALGO to process applications for house purchases provided further grounds for prevarication and at much the same time efforts were made to enlist the support of other Labour controlled districts in Scotland in an attempt to broaden the struggle. NALGO's demand for additional staff allowed the council to call for a report on staffing and by these means decisions about the implementation of government policy were deferred until the beginning of 1981. An exasperated Secretary of State demanded evidence of the council's preliminary provisions for house sales and receiving none he called for a public enquiry in February. At the opening of this some 300 pickets forced their way

into the room and only after a noisy scene in which they were ejected, could the proceedings get under way. Not surprisingly its findings enabled Mr Younger to declare that the councillors would be in default of their statutory duties if they resisted further and it was made clear that penalties would fall on individual members of the Labour Group. This was, of course, a defeat yet the opportunity to challenge the government's housing policy in a very visible and public way was regarded by those who had led the campaign as more than a small crumb of comfort. It enabled the Labour Group to impress on the citizens of the city the effects of what it saw as a foolish and harmful measure, and it provided for many individuals and associations an opportunity to declare their support for the campaign of resistance. In the late summer of 1981 another legal loophole was found by the resisters but this too was blocked by special legislation. After a ruling against the council by the Land Tribunal, the fight was abandoned.

At almost the same time the Lothian efforts at defiance also ceased. Following lengthy and acrimonious debates inside the Labour Party and Labour Group it was agreed to cut £30 millions from the regional budget and although there was subsequently a good deal of bickering over the precise ways the savings could be accounted, the Labour councillors capitulated. Given the new legislation and the extraordinary powers now assumed by the Secretary of State they had little choice. Subsequently, in the regional elections in May '82 the Labour Group lost its small majority. In a 'hung' council the Conservatives took office, depending on some support from the Liberals and S.D.P. The loss of power was obviously regretted by the Labour Party but it could take some comfort from the fact that there clearly remained substantial popular support for its stand.

In both Lothian and Dundee, the mobilisation of local activists, and of past legacies was essentially against the policies of central government. And it was the action and reaction of central government which escalated local resistance. Scottish Office ministers took pains to label both authorities 'militant', and their spending plans 'excessive and unreasonable', contrasting them with 'moderate' authorities. The local struggles of Lothian and Dundee quickly became part of the national struggle between right and left. It was this 'nationalisation' of the local issues which helps explain why Lothian and Dundee became 'causes célèbres'.

## Conclusion

For all the efforts of Lothian and Dundee, serious opposition to the economic and social policies of the 'new right' government has been, to date, rare. Nevertheless, the arbitrary demands for budget cuts and the programmes for housing were widely disliked in Scotland. There were very few local authorities that looked on these manifestations of monetarist policy with favour; not even the Tory councils applauded. Sober and constrained people, the chief administrators, were heard to declare their incredulity and dismay first at the apparently cavalier way in which budget reductions were demanded (with no serious attempts to evaluate the needs or wishes of local people or the disparate requirements of Scotland's highly diversified areas), then at the massive erosion of local autonomy implied by the coercive legislation<sup>(22)</sup>.

Only a very small number of authorities put up any resistance. What made it possible for them to do so? The question, we would submit, is an important one for those who believe that current policies will erode those modest gains made by the organised working class in Britain, and will deepen the divisions and the gross inequalities in our society. The attack on the public provisions of housing, welfare, education and health that have been launched by the new right threaten the living conditions of the poorer sectors of the population and are quite as important as the policies which have had such profound impact on employment. And those attacks focus directly upon local government and other local administrative structures.

We have looked in a preliminary way at resistance as it developed in two very different localities yet despite the wide variations in their industrial and occupational make up, some common features of their capacity for defiance were observable.

First, we should note the changes that had taken place inside their local Labour Parties and Labour Groups. There were changes both in personnel and in ideology. In both Dundee and Lothian new cohorts of younger, more radical councillors and activists had appeared. In Dundee a reputedly corrupt Labour Party had been substantially reformed<sup>(23)</sup> - in part through the efforts of the unionists who played such an important role in the No-Sales campaign. In Lothian the change in the party and group was more gradual but as we have argued, the reorganisation of local government had attracted a new generation



of activists. As with their counterparts in Dundee, they were striving for a more open, participatory style of politics, one which deliberately sought to engage a number of extra-party associations. Moreover, councillors in each group saw in local government the opportunity to implement more genuinely socialist policies. From the closer interaction of elected representatives and the leaders of local pressure groups they hoped to broaden public awareness of the value of local services and the real threat that monetarist policies posed to these. No doubt their crusading zeal was sharpened by the fact that in each case control of their council was by no means secure. The extent of popular mobilisation behind their campaigns of resistance was some vindication of their belief that local politics could be made more vigorous, that when they were encouraged to do so local people would try to defend those items of 'collective consumption' on which they depended.

Secondly, we can see from these 'pilot' researches that the movements of resistance required the successful connection of current struggles with previous ones, and with the legacies of ideas and organisations they have left behind. The Dundee case, in particular, illustrates this. The survival of the liaison committee and the F.T.O. and their relations to the reformed Labour party were vital to the mounting of the campaign. Friedland et al. have encouraged us to see municipal agencies and activities as 'a repository of historical demands' (24), and we could usefully extend their usage of this phrase to include the residues of symbols, ideas and associations that have been forged in successive struggles in all local polities. And we should not confine ourselves to thinking only about the legacies of the left, for right wing groups and right wing campaigns have left their mark too. In contemporary struggles both sides draw upon their respective histories, as we could see in Lothian where the long-established ratepayers groups entered the fray. During the confrontations with George Younger these old legacies, on both sides, were called upon; old campaigners re-emerged and moribund networks of influence had life breathed into them. The point is simple. The shaping of dissent, more broadly of political discourse, is historically conditioned. In localities where the chief protagonists were sensitive to this they had more chance of producing popular mobilisations.

The efforts of Margaret Thatcher's government to 'privatise' many publicly owned resources and substantially to reduce local government expenditure have met with some resistance. Popular movements of opposition have appeared in a small number of local authorities. Of course, they have been defeated, but from that we need not draw entirely gloomy conclusions. The government at Westminster has 'won' only by taking upon itself unprecedented powers to control local authorities, powers which are widely resented (and not only on the left but by a good many Tories who have long believed that local autonomy was precious). Moreover, in those cases where resistance did develop, there was demonstrated a potential for political engagement which skilful political leadership might well build upon. British politics are changing. Political action, process and discourse are gradually breaking out of their institutional strait-jackets. The major parties have been changing, new parties have been emerging and levels of political competence increasing. At all levels there is evidence of a quest for new, less formalised modes of political expression. A socialist party that was prepared to learn from, and work with, the elements of this more fragmented structure, which was willing to listen rather than incorporate and dominate might have some chance of challenging the rule of the new right. We are a long way from that, but a first task for those who wish to see in Britain the establishment of some form of democratic socialism might well be to look in more detail at the stirrings of resistance that have developed in those arenas to which ordinary people have most access: at resistance in local politics.

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Our paper reports the results of some preliminary study of such popular mobilisations in Scotland.
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  5. We wish to acknowledge the contributions of Mike Titterton, Alan Geron, Steven Lucas and Guy Norris. We have benefitted greatly from discussions with them and we have drawn upon the excellent empirical work which they completed.
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  8. Hindess, B., The Decline of Working Class Politics, London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1971.
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  11. Drucker, H.M., "Scotland the divided". New Society, May 13, 1982 p. 250
  12. As one put it, they "started seeing the local authority as an important arena and a place where socialist policies could be put into action and demonstrated as feasible ideals". (Lucas, 1982)

13. Norris, G., "Changing Politics in the Grassroots: A Study of Edinburgh East and Central Constituency Labour Parties, 1981". Unpublished M.A. dissertation, Department of Sociology, University of Edinburgh, 1982.
  14. The two constituencies were selected to provide substantial contrasts one with another but in both cases the majority of their activists had joined the Labour Party relatively recently. In Edinburgh East 69% joined after 1971, in Central 79% had joined since 1979. In terms of occupational class 60% of Edinburgh East's activists were in the Registrar General's Social Classes I and II while in Central 35.5% were so classified but a further 21.5% were students. In Edinburgh East only 13.5% were in semi-skilled or unskilled manual jobs; in Central, only one person held such an occupation. (Norris 1982).
  15. Hindess, B., op. cit. p.163
  16. For further discussion of the struggle in Lothian see Titterton, M., "Hands Off Lothian: A Study in Militancy and Mobilisation in the Locality". Paper presented to the P.S.A./B.S.A. Political Sociology Conference, 1982 University of Sheffield. and Crompton, P., "The Lothian Affair: A Battle of Principles", in this volume.
  17. We have drawn here on the very detailed account of the campaign compiled by Geron, A., "Dundee District Council's Campaign to Prevent the Sale of Council Houses: A Study in Urban Political Organisation and Mobilisation". Unpublished M.A. dissertation, Department of Sociology, University of Edinburgh, 1982
  18. The following data make the point:
- Percentage of Households by Housing Tenure 1971
- |                  | Households |           |        |          |
|------------------|------------|-----------|--------|----------|
| Tenure Type      | Glasgow    | Edinburgh | Dundee | Aberdeen |
| Owner occupation | 22.1       | 46.9      | 20.2   | 30.4     |
| Local authority  | 53.9       | 31.6      | 59.6   | 48.7     |
| Private rental   | 23.9       | 21.5      | 20.2   | 20.6     |
- Source: 1971 Census
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  23. Chalmers, R., op. cit., and Barber, L., and Hearst, D., "How the old guard were bumped off". The Scotsman, April 9, 1981

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